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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000328

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT FORMATION UPDATE: SECURITY DISPUTES AND
PRIME MINISTERIAL COMPETITION DOMINATE TALKS

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: An Iraqi leadership luncheon at the Ambassador's residence February 4, bringing together the four largest blocs in the parliament, produced a heated argument over Ministry of Interior raids and alleged abuses. Prime Minister Ja'afari argued to a group of dubious Tawaffuq leaders that ongoing Interior Ministry raids were necessary security steps. He pleaded for patience and help building "our state", but Tariq al-Hashimi insisted that the government halt its stepped up security operations around Baghdad. The four UIC candidates for prime minister were all in attendance at the lunch, and each made clear in private conversations that they were sticking in the race and did not expect an internal vote until the end of the week. Fadhila Party leader Nadeem al-Jabiri claimed privately to us that he has received a direct threat from Iran demanding he quit the prime minister race. He urged the Ambassador to convince President Talabani to work with Barzani, the Sunnis and Allawi to form a counter-bloc larger than the Shia alliance. Such a bloc, he said, could re-take control of the government formation process from Iran, ensure a representative government, and nominate a UIC figure for the prime ministership. In other conversations Jabiri offered Poloff assurances of a compromise with the Sunni Arabs on federalism and de-Ba'athification in the government plan. Three top members of the Allawi, Shia Islamist and Kurdish blocks voiced strong support for a national leadership council to represent the supreme political authority. END SUMMARY.

A Heated Luncheon

12. (C) An Iraqi leadership luncheon bringing together the four largest blocs in the parliament devolved into a heated argument over security issues at the Ambassador's residence February 4. Tawaffuq leaders Shaykh Khalaf al-Ayan and Tariq al-Hashimi accused Prime Minister Ja'afari of allowing Ministry of Interior forces to conduct mass arrests, detentions, and extrajudicial killings in Sunni Arab neighborhoods of Baghdad. They claimed that such operations were underway as they spoke. Vice President Adel Abd al-Mehdi responded dismissively to the allegations. "We are under attack too," he said. "Our people are being killed." Ja'afari then spoke at length, arguing that the government has seen a rise in assassinations and insecurity every time it lessens up such operations. He argued that it was not fair to expect complete security from a young government in a country still trying to pull itself together after the Saddam era, war, and occupation. Hashimi gave no ground. He noted previous Ja'afari promises for help on investigations that were unfilled. The Sunni Arabs underlined that the government should "stop" the raids.

All Candidates in the Race

13. (C) Side-bar conversations at the lunch affirmed that all candidates are still in play in the Shia alliance's prime ministerial debate. Husayn Shahrastani said that he had not withdrawn his candidacy and did not expect to make a further decision before Wednesday. He said he expected that the bloc of some 26 independents would largely vote for Abd al-Mehdi if he withdrew.

Jabiri Under Threat

14. (C) Fadhila Party leader Nadeem al-Jabiri met privately with the Ambassador after the meeting and told him that he would not withdraw or allow a vote on the subject until Thursday or Friday. Jabiri said that he had sent an envoy to Iran to confront the Iranian government over its inappropriate meddling in the prime ministerial competition. Jabiri said his aide then conveyed to him from Iran what amounted to the most severe threat he has yet received. The Iranians, he claimed, sent the following message: "Nadeem al-Jabiri is an important and influential Shia personality whose well-being should be preserved. He should act to preserve his well-being and that of his religious marja'iyah (i.e., Shaykh Ya'acubi) and party and withdraw his candidacy. He has until Sunday to do so." Jabiri said he was taken aback by the threat, and the Ambassador again voiced a readiness to help with his protection. Jabiri said he was convinced that the UIC was under Iranian control.

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The Argument For a Counter-bloc

15. (C) Jabiri said he would not be cowed by the threat and still believed a "more mature, representative" government could be achieved if a counter-bloc larger than the Shia alliance were formed and then took the bridge-building step of nominating a UIC candidate such as himself for the prime ministership. Jabiri said he believed the Shia street would respect this step because it would be clearly constitutional, and he predicted the UIC might become more compliant after it is taken. He agreed to consult Masoud Barzani further and to meet with the Ambassador again February 5. Jabiri said it was clear to him that Talabani's reluctance to form a counter-bloc was the clearest obstacle to this strategy. He advised the Ambassador to meet with Talabani and attempt to convince him to take this course of action.

Reconciliation and Aggression on the Sidelines

16. (C) Jabiri told Poloff on the side of the luncheon that he favored holding off on regional entity formation for a significant period of time and easing toward federalism through administrative decentralization. Poloff asked Jabiri whether he thought a compromise on de-Ba'athification might be agreed to whereby the de-Ba'athification law remains in place but the de-Ba'athification Commission itself is dissolved, and enforcement of the law is turned over to the judiciary. Jabiri said he would back such a compromise.

17. (C) Separately -- and far less encouragingly -- Tawaffuq leader Shaykh Khalaf al-Ayan told Poloff that he considered the Shia leaders gathered at the lunch to be Persians. He brushed off their election as due to voter fraud and told Poloff that he was confident that the people of Najaf would vote for Tawaffuq if they were given the freedom to vote their conscience without militia and Iranian intimidation. Al-Ayan said that believed the Iraqi "resistance" was

legitimate self-defense by Sunnis. He said all terror attacks against Iraqi civilians were carried out by Zarqawi, who was entirely an Iranian agent.

National Policy Council

18. (C) Transition Assembly Speaker al-Hassani told PolCouns on the luncheon's margin that he strongly supported the idea of a committee that brought the top political forces together into one room to hash out political differences. It should have the "state institutions" of President, Prime Minister, and their deputies, he opined. It also ought to include the leaders of the political blocks if they do not occupy one of the top government posts already. Nadhim Jabiri joined the conversation and also endorsed the concept as a way to widen conversation between different political forces. Kurdish official Barhem Salih then joined in and said the idea of a council was a good one, but it had to have the top leaders to be useful. It needed to represent, he said, a political "marji'yah" (source of authority). Salih, Hassani and Jabiri all agreed it should be the final policy authority, over the Prime Minister. If it were merely advisory, Salih predicted, the top leaders would decline to participate. Hassani and Jabiri nodded in agreement. PolCouns observed that if the council had genuine line authority the constitution might need to be amended. Hassani waved this off, noting that, if the top political leaders agreed on it, the amendment would not pose a big problem.

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